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Howard County Times

Officials say they're exploring other sites for new school in Elkridge area

Board doesn't disclose locations of alternatives to CSX site

By Sara Toth
stoth@patuxent.com

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The Howard County Board of Education reassured the public Thursday night that the school's central office is exploring three other sites for a new elementary school in the Elkridge area, but voted against disclosing them at its meeting.

The board is in a "difficult and challenging" position, said Janet Siddiqui, board chair, because the site chosen for a much-needed elementary school on Coca-Cola Drive in Elkridge is in close proximity to a proposed site for a CSX railroad cargo transfer facility.

While CSX and the Maryland Department of Transportation can decide to proceed at the Elkridge site anywhere from four months to a year, Siddiqui said, the school board must decide whether to proceed at the school site in the next two months. Siddiqui said the school board would have to make a decision by its first meeting in June.

The proposed CSX site in Elkridge is one of four in the state: the other potential sites are in Jessup, Anne Arundel and Prince George's counties.

The school board said it has three other sites under consideration, but would not disclose their locations.

The school site in Elkridge has already gone through the state's interagency committee on school construction's clearinghouse, said board member Ellen Flynn Giles. The other sites have been submitted to the state, but there are "no other sites on the horizon," she said, as opposed to the Elkridge site.

"The opportunity to get a school built by 2013 is rapidly shutting," said Ken Roey, the school system's

executive director of facilities planning and management.

A feasibility study conducted by the school system showed that overcrowding in the region merits the new, 600-seat school.

Overcrowded schools in the area include Bellows Spring and Elkridge elementary schools. Built in 2003, Bellows Spring has a capacity of 662, and its current enrollment is 851. The 19-year-old Elkridge Elementary has a capacity of 779 students, and has an enrollment of 847.

Last year, the school board approved the Elkridge site. The site included a 20.2-acre property and \$4 million from Preston Capital Partner to include a school in the community. For each year the system does not build a school, Siddiqui said, it loses \$1 million of that money.

Board member Allen Dyer moved to discuss, and then vote on, disclosing to the public the other three sites the board is considering.

"My approach is that if you're making a major decision that involves the community, if there are alternatives available, the sooner those are made public, the easier it is to get feedback, and more eyeballs on the situation," he said. "If we let the public know what we've been doing, that, to me, would make for a stronger (decision-making) process."

Dyer, however, was voted down, 4-1. Roey and Siddiqui pointed out that it was against board policy to disclose locations prematurely, and now was not the time to re-evaluate that policy. Roey outlined the other disadvantages to that disclosure.

"You have people not interested in revealing their business interests to the public," he said. "It could drive the asking price up, or discourage folks from coming to the table as readily as they might, if the proceedings weren't confidential."

"I certainly understand the need for public involvement, but it's a question of when (the public involvement occurs). I think the public would appreciate knowing that, now, but I'm not sure it would help anything in this particular situation."